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## THE REACTION AGAINST WILLIAM GODWIN

### I

In 1801 William Godwin published his *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon*, a pamphlet in which, with dignity and praiseworthy restraint of feeling, he undertook to reply to the numerous vehement and more or less vituperative critics, who, repelled and, in some cases, panic-stricken by his doctrines of rationalistic anarchism, had been attacking his *Political Justice* in lectures, sermons, novels, and pamphlets.<sup>1</sup> Preparatory to his consideration of the charges of his opponents, Godwin reviews the various phases of the reaction against him. He emphasizes the fact that upon its publication in 1793 *Political Justice* had immediately gained him such credit with people of literary and intellectual distinction that for more than four years he had listened only to the "voice of commendation."<sup>2</sup> But he goes on to explain that after the excesses in France had started a violent reaction against those principles of the Revolution which were held responsible for the crimes committed to the cry "Liberty and fraternity," many of his friends had gradually

<sup>1</sup> Of the spirit which pervades five of the best pages in Godwin's reply, Coleridge says in a marginal comment in his copy of the pamphlet in the British Museum: "They reflect great honor on Godwin's head and heart. Tho' I did it only in the zenith of his reputation, yet I feel remorse *ever* to have spoken unkindly of such a man."

<sup>2</sup> Hazlitt's statement is often quoted: "No work gave in our time such a blow to the philosophical mind of our country." An unknown author testifies: "In many places, perhaps some hundreds, in England and Scotland copies were bought by subscription, and read aloud in meetings of the subscribers" (*Public Characters*, London, 1799).

deserted the cause of freedom, and he, alone having remained faithful, had found himself the object of criticism, at first respectful and judicial, and later by degrees more bitterly hostile and insulting. With the attitude of two pamphlets and Malthus' *Essay upon Population*, which had appeared in 1798, Godwin has no fault to find. But he expresses keen resentment that in 1799 his former friend Sir James Mackintosh, in his public lectures upon *The Law of Nature and Nations*, had treated him "like a highwayman or an assassin," and represented him "as a wretch, who only wanted the power in order to prove himself as infernal as Robespierre." Godwin then records that the next year after Mackintosh's attack two new critics had appeared against him. Rev. Robert Hall, the distinguished Baptist divine, had warned his flock against the pernicious radicalism of the day in a famous sermon upon "Modern Infidelity" in which, in Godwin's opinion, "every notion of toleration or decorum was treated with infuriated contempt."<sup>1</sup> Then, in April of the same year, another of Godwin's friends, Dr. Samuel Parr, had felt himself under obligation, in a sermon before the Lord Mayor of London himself, to attempt to demolish, as perilous to the moral order, the doctrine of universal benevolence, a cornerstone of *Political Justice*. Godwin brushes aside with contempt the insults of other critics—"the vulgar contumelies of the author of the Pursuits of Literature, novels of buffoonery and scandal to the amount of half a score, and British critics, Anti-Jacobin newspapers, and Anti-Jacobin magazines without number."<sup>2</sup>

Godwin's account of the reaction against him is illuminating as far as it goes, but it can scarcely be regarded as complete. It is

<sup>1</sup> In his younger days Robert Hall, like so many others, was an ardent supporter of the cause of liberty, but after the atrocities of the Revolution he recoiled from its doctrines. This change of attitude is disclosed by a comparison of *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (1793), in which he took issue with Burke and extolled the rights of man, and his sermon, "Modern Infidelity." This latter address, first made in Bristol in October (1800), and repeated in Cambridge in November, created a deep impression; it attracted to the dissenting meeting-house as regular hearers both students and fellows. Mackintosh in his lectures at Lincoln's Inn, and Dr. Parr in his notes to his "Spital Sermon," quoted it with approval, and subsequently it went through many editions. In 1803 Hall returned to his attack upon Godwin in his sermon, "The Sentiments Proper to the Present Crisis." See Vol. I of *Works*, 3 vols., New York, 1832.

<sup>2</sup> Two pamphlets not mentioned by title in the discussion above are: W. C. Proby, *Modern Philosophy and Barbarism, or a Comparison between the Theory of Godwin and the Practice of Lycurgus*, London, 1798; and Thomas Green, *An Examination of the Leading Principles of the New System of Morals, as that Principle is Stated and Applied*

deficient in two respects. In the first place, Godwin in his analysis does not put his finger on all the causes of the hostility of which he was the victim. In the second place, he is apparently ignorant of the fact that the reaction against him had begun earlier than he indicates. It is the purpose of the first part of this paper to supply this missing information in preparation for a full discussion in the second part of the fiction written in criticism of his radicalism.

Godwin is undoubtedly correct in explaining the reaction of public opinion against him by the growing antagonism to the whole revolutionary movement felt among conservatives and those liberals who had been shocked by the course of events in France. Yet it is possible to recognize in addition more specific and personal reasons why the hostility to Godwin gradually grew more bitter. Probably he shared in the odium which the more zealous of his disciples incurred by the active promulgation of his views. John Thelwall, possessed of an ardor for propaganda of which Godwin himself repeatedly disapproved, in defiance of government opposition persisted in public lectures to disseminate revolutionary doctrine, until finally in 1795, after the government had failed to convict him of treason in 1794, he was muzzled by the Pitt and Grenville Bill against Sedition.<sup>1</sup> In 1796, at one of the meetings of the Royston bookclub, when the subject of discussion was the problem whether private affection was compatible with universal benevolence, Crabb Robinson defended the Godwinian point of view so warmly that two years later, when he visited Bury, he discovered that he was in ill repute, and that Rev. Robert Hall had strenuously remonstrated with a member of his church whose intention had been to entertain Robinson.<sup>2</sup> The result of this incident was an energetic exchange of letters between Robinson

in *Mr. Godwin's Political Justice, in a Letter to a Friend*, 1798 (2d ed., 1799). Here might be cited also two works by an anti-Godwinian, Robert Fellowes: *Religion without Cant: or, a Preservative against Lukewarmness and Intolerance*, London, 1801 (see pp. 307 ff., 328 ff., 392); and *A Picture of Christian Philosophy. The Fourth Edition. With a Supplement on the Culture and Practice of Benevolence*, London, 1803 (see pp. 75 ff., 297 ff.).

<sup>1</sup> For Thelwall's indebtedness to Godwin see, for example, the two lectures on the *Prospective Principles of Virtue*, Vol. I of *The Tribune, a Periodical Publication, Consisting Chiefly of the Political Lectures of J. Thelwall*, 3 vols., London, 1795-96. For his personal relations with Godwin see Charles Cestre, *John Thelwall*, London and New York, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> Crabb-Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, selected and edited by Thomas Sadler (2 vols., 3d ed., London and New York, 1872), I, 21.

and Hall—a correspondence which reveals the increasing alarm with which the propagation of the ideas of *Political Justice* was viewed.

Those of Godwin's disciples who revealed in one way or another any sympathy with his denunciation of marriage in favor of greater freedom in the relationship of the sexes, were especially responsible in no small degree for the popular hatred of the author of *Political Justice*. In 1796 Mary Hays, who had long been the friend and admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft, and whose reputation had, as Crabb Robinson informs us, unjustly suffered on that account, published the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*.<sup>1</sup> In this novel the heroine, taking her cue from *The Rights of Woman*, deploras as a tragedy the economic dependence of her sex, and, fortified by the individualistic doctrines of *Political Justice*, upholds the right of private judgment, offers herself as mistress to the man she passionately loves, and in general suffers cruelly in her continual clashes with the conventions of a "distempered civilization." Such being the rebellious spirit of the novel, it was inevitable that in the public mind what appeared as the iniquities of Godwin and Mary Hays became associated, and that subsequent novels, designed to expose Godwinian sophistry, quoted from both *Political Justice* and *Emma Courtney*.<sup>2</sup>

After the death of his wife Godwin, by his publication of *The Wrongs of Woman* among the posthumous works of Mary Wollstonecraft and by the *Memoirs* in 1798, made a conscientious attempt to do her honor, but in each case his efforts were misdirected, and, ironically enough, succeeded only in intensifying the animosity against himself and in bringing Mary Wollstonecraft into greater disrepute with sternly "respectable" people. *The Wrongs of Woman* made it clear that association with him had deepened her radicalism, and that, more defiant and uncompromising in her attitude toward society than she had been in her earlier work, Mary Wollstonecraft was inclined to sympathize with his attack upon marriage. As a protest against economic conditions that permitted to women so few honorable employments and made prostitution an almost inevitable alternative, as a plea for more liberal divorce laws by which a woman

<sup>1</sup> See also for the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft upon Miss Hays the latter's *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*, London, 1793.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Charles Lloyd, *Edmund Oliver*, 2 vols., Bristol, 1798; Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, 3 vols., 1800.

might more easily free herself from a drunkard or a rake, and as a defense of the wife who, revolted by the degrading misery of life with a dissipated husband, deserts him to enter a union with a man who intellectually and morally is her equal, this vivid naturalistic novel seemed to aim a blow at the very foundations of morality. The success the same year of such a play as Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, in which an erring wife is forgiven by her husband, indicated to the popular mind a dangerous and growing sympathy with the adulteress. Ladies of impeccable propriety, like Miss Hannah More and Mrs. Jane West, indignant at such leniency and armed with the terrors of Christian charity as they interpreted it, issued warnings against the insidious connivance at viciousness, and made known what sentence *they* thought ought to be passed upon the outcast and the unfaithful wife.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, as we have said, Godwin's well-intentioned biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, in which matters were given publicity that would otherwise have remained unknown, provided the unfeeling, blundering enemy with additional weapons of attack. Whereas *Caleb Williams* (1794) had impressed the public largely by virtue of its thrilling narrative, and *The Enquirer* had been received indifferently as a less vigorous statement of some of the doctrines of *Political Justice*, the *Memoirs*, with its frank, unapologetic account of Mary Wollstonecraft's relations with Imlay and Godwin, seemed an affront to decency, affording convincing proof that by ingenious sophistry the new philosophers would sanction unbridled licentiousness. In the second edition in the same year poor Godwin attempted to tone down such passages as were likely to offend the moral sensibilities of his readers, but his effort at reparation was too late. In his novel, *The Infernal Quixote*, Charles Lucas describes with sarcastic comment Godwin's *Memoirs* as the "History of the Intrigues of His Own Wife."<sup>2</sup> Outraged that the philosopher should have felt himself

<sup>1</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (2 vols., 3d ed., London, 1799), I, 47, 48, 145; Mrs. Jane West, *Letters Addressed to a Young Man* (3 vols., London, 1801), II, 221, 225. See also the *Monthly Review*, June, 1798. The critic prefers A. Schink's version of *The Stranger*, in which the wife considers elopement, but does not actually sin. This change the translator regarded as "more consistent with moral sentiment, and more congenial to the heart of an English audience." Unfortunately for the preservation of English morality, this sanitary version was never played (see Genest).

<sup>2</sup> *The Infernal Quixote* (4 vols., London, 1801), I, 170.

under obligation to apologize for his indulgence in marriage, an institution of which he had made previously such unsparing criticism, Rev. Robert Hall branded Godwin's book as "a narrative of his licentious amours."<sup>1</sup> When former admirers of Mary Wollstonecraft read of "the errors which love should have concealed," "the idol they had worshipped" became "an image of clay."<sup>2</sup> Thus Godwin's effort to vindicate Mary Wollstonecraft was persistently misconstrued, and an insidious significance was seen in the fact that the authoress of such a book of passionate protest as *The Wrongs of Woman* had loved out of wedlock. Generally with little justice and sometimes with even less decency the cry was taken up by various writers and echoed in review, treatise, novel, and satiric poem.<sup>3</sup>

It has been shown, I think, in what respects Godwin's analysis of the causes of the reaction against him is incomplete. The chronology of his account is also not entirely satisfactory. Godwin is scarcely accurate when he asserts that "for more than four years," that is, until about 1798, *Political Justice* remained without the slightest refutation. Although he had met Coleridge at the close of 1794, perhaps he did not know that in the Bristol lectures in 1795 and in *The Watchman* in 1796 the young poet had attacked the principles of *Political Justice*. During the same period, while he was at Race-down, Dorsetshire, Wordsworth, who had for a long time been plunged into pessimism at the failure of the Godwinian philosophy, under the test of experience, to clarify his spiritual problems and to vindicate reason as an infallible guide, emerged from his doubt and self-analysis and wrote *The Borderers* as a record of his emancipation from the seducing formulas of Godwinian optimism. As far as I

<sup>1</sup> "Modern Infidelity," in Vol. I of *Works*, 3 vols, New York, 1832.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's biography in Vol. II of Mrs. Elwood's *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England*, 2 vols., London, 1843.

<sup>3</sup> John Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1800), p. 134; *The Millennium, a Poem in Three Cantos* (London, 1800), I, ll. 423-40; *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, June, 1803. As late as 1817 a scurrilous book, *The Sexagenarian; or The Recollections of a Literary Life* (2 vols., London), describes (Vol. I, chap. lii) in these atrocious terms Mary Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide after Imlay's desertion: "The lady did not indeed, in imitation of Sappho, precipitate herself from another Leucadian rock; she chose a more vulgar mode of death; she put some lead into her pockets, and threw herself into the water. She did not, however, use lead enough, as there was still gas sufficient left in her head to counterpoise it. She was rescued from the watery bier, and lived again to experience the feverish varieties of the tender passion."

have been able to discover, in the considerable body of anti-Godwinian literature, *The Borderers* is the only work that has dramatic form, and Wordsworth seems to have been the first to adopt the plan of exposing the dangers of Godwinism by means of a fiction exhibiting the disastrous results of carrying the principles of *Political Justice* into practice. With *The Borderers* itself Godwin may not have been acquainted, as Wordsworth did not publish it until 1842. In 1797, as we shall see, the *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* hilariously burlesqued cherished Godwinian ideas, and the *Anti-Jacobin* (December 18) heaped ridicule upon his conception of gratitude and marriage. These efforts, however, Godwin may not have regarded as rising to the dignity of a refutation.

The facts point to the conclusion that from 1795 the attacks upon Godwin grew more frequent and more bitter, precipitated, as they were, partly by the general reaction against the spirit of the French Revolution and partly by the excessive zeal of his disciples and the unguarded frankness of his *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1798, the year of the publication of *The Wrongs of Woman* and the *Memoirs*, there was a sudden increase of hostility, two anti-Godwinian novels and three anti-Godwinian pamphlets making their appearance. In 1799 and 1800 the antagonism was scarcely less bitter. In 1801, in his reply to Dr. Parr's "Spital Sermon," Godwin declared: "The cry spread like a general infection, and I have been told that not even a petty novel . . . now ventures to aspire to favour, unless it contains some expression of dislike and abhorrence to the new philosophy, and its chief (or shall I say its most voluminous?) English adherent."

## II

To an account of these anti-Godwinian novels, an almost forgotten page in the history of our fiction, I wish to give attention in the rest of this paper. Few of these novels are mentioned in the current manuals, yet their number—and further search would probably reveal more of them stowed away in old libraries—indicates how great was thought to be the necessity of putting out of court such revolutionary doctrines as Godwin had formulated. Obviously it is only by the accumulation of such evidence that we can interpret



justly the spirit of the age and estimate the solidarity of conservative opinion. It is noteworthy that the best of these books were rapidly disposed of, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) by Elizabeth Hamilton and *The Vagabond* (1799) by George Walker going through three editions within three years. In the Preface of the third edition of his work Walker, who had appropriately dedicated his book to the reactionary Lord Bishop of Llandaff, expresses the hope that the rapid sale of his anti-Godwinian novel is proof that the aristocratic classes are awakening to a sense of duty, and are encouraging by the purchase of their books the authors who write in defense of the established order. It is a shame, in Walker's opinion, that Tom Paine should have made a fortune from his inflammatory treatises. The amount of anti-Godwinian material in these different novels varies. Sometimes, as in the anonymous *Memoirs of M. de Brinboc* (1805), it is very slight indeed, introduced, one suspects, largely because it was the fashion in some quarters to bespatter the modern philosophers; more frequently it forms the very substance of the work. The mood of these novels varies also, ranging from burlesque, as in the anonymous *St. Godwin* (1800), to tragedy, as in Charles Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver* (1798) and Mrs. Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1804).

Their bitterly uncompromising attitude toward the doctrines of *Political Justice* is reflected by the novelists in their characterization of Godwinians. Sometimes the philosopher is represented as a well-intentioned man imposed upon by a doctrine of specious philanthropy and conscientiously undertaking to disseminate his radical ideas. Such are Lok in *Waldorf*, Glenmurray in *Adeline Mowbray*, and Arnou in *The Infernal Quixote*, all of whom come to regret bitterly the havoc they have wrought. More often the novelist represents the philosopher as a cold-blooded, calculating villain, who finds in lawless Godwinian individualism a theory of life thoroughly congenial to his unprincipled nature, and who deliberately employs the insinuating doctrines of *Political Justice* to destroy the moral scruples of his victims in order to accomplish his own vile designs. This character is a resuscitation of the Machiavellian villain of Elizabethan tragedy, the triumphant egoist, proud of his intellectual powers, contemptuous of his victims, and doing evil systematically.

Such a type is of frequent recurrence in revolutionary literature, especially in Germany, but Wordsworth is probably the first to represent the type as a propagator of Godwinism. Like Oswald, in Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, ruthlessly destroying all the finer sentiments that ennoble humanity, are Fitzosborne in Mrs. West's *A Tale of the Times* (1799), Vallaton in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Marauder in *The Infernal Quixote*, Williams in the anonymous novel *Dorothea, or A Ray of the New Light* (1801), and Denham in the anonymous *The Citizen's Daughter* (1804). Stupeo, the Pangloss of *The Vagabond*, instructs his pupil, "When we [i.e., the philosophers] have shaken off the influence of everything called principle, are satisfied we have no portion of eternity, and that the fable of an avenging Deity is an old woman's tale, what power, I ask, can control us? We become almost too great for the world, mind seems to rise superior to matter, crime becomes nothing; all that men call murder, incest, lust, and cruelty, are trifling." . . . "I feel," cries Frederick, "I feel I am now free. I shall render my name immortal, for no human tie, no moral check shall stay the purpose of my power."<sup>1</sup>

When the novelists undertake to exhibit the Godwinian system in operation in actual life, they represent it, according as their mood is satiric or serious, as responsible for the most ludicrous situations or utter misery. Space forbidding the discussion of all the ideas the sophistry of which is thus exposed, we can give our attention to the treatment of only the most significant of these conceptions.

Fundamental in the structure of *Political Justice* is the idea, derived from Helvetius, that man is the product of his education, that is, the sum total of all the influences that play upon him from the very moment of birth. This theory of environment, responsible for much of Godwin's antagonism to any form of government as one of the most evil and most powerful of the forces molding human character, was burlesqued with Aristophanic extravagance by Elizabeth Hamilton. Bridgetina Botherim, a squint-eyed Godwinian, explains that she imbibed a "love of literature and an importunate sensibility" from the milk of her foster-nurse, a village girl who at

<sup>1</sup> Vol. II, chap. iv. Walker's attacks upon Godwin occurred *after* he had slavishly copied the plot of *Caleb Williams* in his own novel *Theodore Cyphon* (1796). Certainly a Godwinian conception of gratitude! With Stupeo's *credo* compare that of Marauder in *The Infernal Quixote*, II, 297, 298.

the time was being taught to read by the parish clerk in Muddy Lane. In the "fifth grand era" of her life she acquired her passion for metaphysics.

My mother got a packet of brown snuff from London by the mail-coach; it was wrapped in two proof-sheets of the quarto-edition of the Political Justice. I eagerly snatched up the paper, and notwithstanding the frequent fits of sneezing it occasioned, from the quantity of snuff contained in every fold, I greedily devoured its contents. I read and sneezed, and sneezed and read, till the germ of philosophy began to fructify my soul. From that moment I became a philosopher and need not inform you of the important consequences.<sup>1</sup>

In *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, also by Elizabeth Hamilton, Mr. Sceptic raises his fellow-philosophers to a high pitch of excitement by expressing his conviction that, by altering their environment, sparrows might be changed to honeybees. As Miss Ardent remarks, "According to the arguments of the young philosopher, I see no reason why, by a proper course of education, a monkey may not be a Minister of State, or a goose Lord Chancellor of England." The philosophers enthusiastically determine to put Mr. Sceptic's theory to immediate trial. They catch three hundred sparrows, build a huge hive, and put the birds therein. At dawn Sir Caprice hastens to the hive in his night robe to find out if the sparrows have begun to hum. Hark! he hears a buzz. He listens. No! It is a solitary bee in a shrub near by. When the philosophers discover that the sparrows have flown away, they conclude that the birds have swarmed on some neighboring tree and may be fixed in their abode by a beating of pans. Hope is rekindled. The next morning, undaunted by a pouring rain, the philosophers sally forth with tin pans and beat them violently beneath a tree on which they have spied a few sparrows. But the birds are obdurate and refuse to swarm. "The master of the bees declared he had never seen a swarm so unmanageable."<sup>2</sup>

We should not, however, allow such a satire, excellent as it is, to blind us to the fact that it was just such impregnable optimism that inspired much of the social idealism of the revolutionary era and encouraged faith in human regeneration. Men of common sense who

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (3d ed., 1801), II, 83 ff.

<sup>2</sup> II, 158 ff.

had read their Rousseau and Helvetius tried to carry these theories into practice. Thomas Day, Richard Edgeworth, and John Thelwall experimented with the education of children. So sincerely did Crabb Robinson and Bentham admire Helvetius that, as young men, they thought of entering his service as servants.<sup>1</sup>

Godwin's confidence that the individual might, without danger to either himself or society, dispense with the restraint of law or government was grounded in the conviction that man was fundamentally a rational being, and that in every situation in life he might rely upon his private judgment to supply the place of general principles in the determination of what was just. This philosophy, in a savage but penetrating piece of analysis, Lucas stigmatizes as a species of diabolism because of its affinity with the spirit of Satan. "So these Worthies, who carry every law, divine and human, within their own breasts, can never be guilty of any crime; for, whatever their conduct is, they can justify it to themselves; they never act without a reason, and that reason is law."<sup>2</sup> This creed dominates the actions of Godwinian villains so that, after a moment of introspection, they always see in the inclinations of egoism merely the dictates of an infallible understanding. Covetous of Amelia, who is beloved by his dearest friend, Frederick is able to find adequate Godwinian grounds for undertaking her seduction.<sup>3</sup> With his eye on Lord Monteith's estates, Fitzosborne argues to the conclusion that he himself, "an active, intelligent, enterprising citizen," should possess the property rather than "an indolent sensualist."<sup>4</sup> This creed, too, is the means by which schemers like Fitzosborne and Marauder corrupt their deluded victims, silencing by ingenious sophistry the instinctive protests of their moral nature and encouraging a defiant independence of all the prohibitions of traditional ethics. Striving to blunt Waldorf's conscience, Lok, like another Wordsworthian Oswald, argues cunningly: "Your judgment can never be wrong. Reason is never erroneous, but *false* sentiment may be your destruction. You are influenced by a set of chimerical notions of probity and honor; but this is the effect of romance; you will soon discriminate

<sup>1</sup> Robinson's *Diary*, I, 195.

<sup>2</sup> *The Infernal Quizote*, II, 268; III, 182.

<sup>3</sup> *The Vagabond*, Vol. I, chap. iii.

<sup>4</sup> *A Tale of the Times*, II, 294.

better and think differently."<sup>1</sup> Waldorf proves an apt pupil; determined to be "no automaton, agitated by springs to act by the directions of others," he rises superior to public opinion and accomplishes the ruin of three innocent women. Indeed, all of these rampant individualists are sensitive lest someone trespass upon the right of private judgment. Dorothea Melville, educated by a governess who is a disciple of the New Philosophy, at sixteen years of age repudiates her control as a form of despotism. Stupeo doubts "whether the very article of our birth be not a great breach of political justice, since our consent was not required."<sup>2</sup>

To no other principle of his philosophy do Godwin's opponents give more attention than to his doctrine of universal benevolence. What excited the repugnance of Godwin's contemporaries was the fact that his philosophy, while apparently directing human activity to a noble goal of unselfish achievement, in reality confused ethical values and tended to brutalize character and to encourage relentless egoism. As a rigid utilitarian Godwin laid it down as a fundamental principle that according to the requirements of absolute justice in every action of his life the individual should regulate his conduct with a view to producing the greatest good to the greatest number, and accordingly, if it is necessary in order to realize this ideal, he must proscribe all those immediate incentives to action—gratitude, friendship, domestic affection, and patriotism—which traditional moralists have insistently eulogized, but which, in fact, selfishly attach us to our associates and create a preference detrimental to the interest of humanity. From this slaughter of our most cherished feelings in the name of universal benevolence Godwin's contemporaries recoiled. They recognized that, not being omniscient, and consequently being unable to determine the ultimate effects of a proposed action, the conscientious man would contemplate helplessly innumerable possible modes of conduct; his duties as husband, father, and citizen would be obscured; in the interval his power of action would be paralyzed; and energies that might have been fruitful of much good would be wasted in futile, blundering calculations. They recognized that by means of this philosophy the wicked man would be able to justify

<sup>1</sup> *Waldorf*, I, 74.

*The Vagabond*, Vol. I, chap. ii.

the most egoistic impulses and under the guise of general utility prey upon society and commit the most heinous offenses. Evil is bad enough under any circumstances, but it is infinitely worse when it masquerades as virtue. We are assured by one good clergyman that "the unholy speculations of Mr. Godwin were founded entirely upon this basis." Indeed, in defiance of truth and justice, the terrified moralists altogether too often bring the accusation that the new doctrines are adopted largely by those who wish to use them as a shield for crimes or vice.<sup>1</sup> Both the pamphleteers and the novelists show that the boasted reason is miserably unequal to the high tasks Godwin would impose upon it. They make it clear that reason is deficient in power to comprehend life in all its infinite variety and complexity and thereby to choose, on the basis of an unerring vision of the ultimate consequences of alternative courses of conduct, that course more conducive to the general good. They reveal the painful truth that in the absence of general principles the reason is incapable of a cool, detached analysis and judgment of facts, is swayed by the feelings, and for the most part becomes the base servitor of self-interest. They point to the danger that, in the flattering belief that the universe is the only suitable field for the activity of his benevolent impulses, the individual will scornfully neglect the numerous opportunities afforded by social intercourse for doing immediate and actual good within his capacity, and consequently life will be gradually stripped of the consolations conferred by gratitude, affection, and compassion.

In *Edmund Oliver* (1798), the novel after which Mme de Genlis, wishing to refute the Encyclopedists, modeled her *La Femme philosophe* (1800), Charles Lloyd, Coleridge's friend, arraigns the philosophy of reason and philanthropy. The heroine, Gertrude Sinclair, has dispensed with marriage and accepted D'Oyley as her lover. When Edmund appears and demands the fulfilment of her former promise to him, Gertrude, imagining herself completely emancipated from conventional scruples, attempts to argue away the obligation as a fetter of the mind, but in the conflict between her feelings and her "omnipotent reason" she suffers bitterly, and finally, when D'Oyley abandons her, her philosophy utterly fails her and she

<sup>1</sup> See Robert Hall, Findlater, Hannah More, and John Bowles.

is plunged into moral chaos. Obviously this is similar to the spiritual tragedy of the Wordsworthian Marmaduke, occasioned in this case, however, by different circumstances. In a satiric vein Walker has exhibited the inadequacy of reason. When a fire breaks out in Amelia's house, Frederick rushes to the rescue. Seizing a ladder, he deliberates whether he ought to save Amelia or her father, for, as a thorough Godwinian, he realizes that, should he save the one of less benefit to society, he would be committing a shameful injustice. While he is thus debating, the roof crashes in and kills both objects of his reflection. When the peasants, believing Frederick had good reason to wish to get rid of Amelia, threaten him with violence, Mr. Fenton urges his son to flee. Then Frederick deliberates whether his flight or his death would more promote the cause of truth, but when he hears the roaring mob outside he decides on the former course. "I really did not see that any good would result from my being hanged."<sup>1</sup> Later Frederick and Dr. Alegos visit a strange land inhabited by Godwinians, and meeting a man in deep thought inquire the object of his reflections. "I am debating," he replies, "whether it will be most to the public good, that I should help half an hour at getting in the harvest, or labour half an hour at building the new granary; I have spent all the morning in considering, and cannot determine."<sup>2</sup> In these fantastic instances the utilitarian idea results merely in futile mental exertion, absolute paralysis of the power of action, and the defeat of the benevolent impulse.

The doctrine of philanthropy is responsible for other equally startling situations. In obvious satire upon Emma Courteney's pursuit of Harley, under the spur of passion and a Godwinian sense of duty to herself and posterity, Bridgetina Botherim, infatuated with Dr. Sidney and inspired to serve the cause of general utility, abandons her old mother and follows him to London. When he puts her off, she waylays him wherever she can; when he flees from her as from a Nemesis, she bombards him with letters, fortified by the Godwinian conviction that as the reason is always accessible to argument it is necessary only to ply long enough a catapult of logic. In view

<sup>1</sup> *The Vagabond*, Vol. I, chap. iv. Godwin had maintained that under such circumstances Fenelon's valet should save the philosopher in preference to his own father. In *Edmund Oliver* (I, 128), Lloyd condemns this decision.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. II, chap. viii.

of her daughter's vagaries, one is not surprised that Bridgetina's illiterate old mother inquires with asperity: "And who is this General Utility whose name is forever in Biddy's mouth? She is always in a fret when I ask her, as if I should know all about him as well as she; but I am sure she may well know I never seed a General but General Villiers, in all my life." The anonymous writer of *Dorothea* represents her heroine as debating with herself whether she will marry a philosopher or an aristocrat, and as deciding in favor of the latter on the unsentimental ground that the good of society requires that she seize this opportunity to uproot the prejudices of a conservative.<sup>1</sup> Out of solicitude for humanity Frederick refuses to fight a duel and hazard the possibility of depriving the world of his services.<sup>2</sup> Vallaton betrays to the Revolutionary Tribunal an old man to whom he owes seven hundred pounds sterling, having convinced himself that this money belongs to him because he can accomplish the greater good with it.<sup>3</sup> Desirous of Arnon's property, Marauder tries to persuade him as "a citizen of the world" and "a lover of political justice" not to be influenced by such a weakness as love for a son.<sup>4</sup> After he has robbed his wife of her property and deserted her and his children, Williams cries: "Justice, immutable and unerring justice, lifts me above all selfish ties and considerations; I am neither father, husband, or brother to any individual! my children are posterity in the aggregate! I am wedded only to universal philanthropy, and my brother is man!"<sup>5</sup> Thus the novelists make clear their belief that, were Godwin's doctrine of the greatest good to the greatest number put in practice, it would encourage miserable self-deception and let loose upon society all the evils of a fatuous and, in many cases, criminal egoism.

Godwin never sinned against consistency. He eulogized liberty; it followed that he execrated marriage. It is absurd to expect continual agreement in inclination between two developing personalities. Whenever the man or the woman experiences discomfort from the restraints of an uncongenial union, let either him or her be free to

<sup>1</sup> I, 117.

<sup>2</sup> *The Vagabond*, Vol. I, chap. iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, I, 73.

<sup>4</sup> *The Infernal Quixote*, III, 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Dorothea*, II, 148.



leave the other; Godwin did not shrink even from the suggestion that marriage be abolished. This was his protest; his critics construed it merely as a plea for licentiousness. The Godwinian villains specially seem to be convinced that wedlock is a species of despotism; the novelists represent them as preying upon innocence, and as a warning depict the miseries of innumerable Clarissa Harlowes. No novel is without its ruined virgin or betrayed wife. A few, indeed, like Mrs. West's *A Tale of the Times* and Mrs. Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*, give more attention to this aspect of Godwinism than to any other. The moral is always the obvious one: the woman who repudiates marriage is ostracized by society, and is, in the end, generally abandoned by her lover. Having been left to her own pursuits, Adeline Mowbray has read much revolutionary literature and is fired with a desire to carry her doctrines into practice. She meets a young philosopher, Glenmurry, who has written against marriage, and in time becomes his mistress. Society begins its punishment; because she knows the purity of her own motives Adeline suffers all the more when she is ignored by Glenmurry's friends, sneered at by servants, insulted by libertines, and driven from town as soon as her past is discovered. When, broken by her sorrows, she lies on her deathbed, she confesses the folly of her doctrines and admits her misery justly inflicted. Waldorf, the hero of Miss King's novel, having wrecked the lives of three women, is overwhelmed at the enormity of the evils he has brought upon others by his fallacious teachings, and in his remorse shoots himself. *The Citizen's Daughter, or What Might Be* shows by contrast the admirable self-respect and worth of a wife who, refusing to be the dupe of her feelings, is not deluded by the new liberal doctrines of sex-relationship and scornfully rejects the dishonorable proposals of a lover. This is a reproof to Mary Wollstonecraft, who had protested that the spiritual bondage of a woman unhappily married justified her in seeking a congenial mate.

The tendency of Godwin's assault upon marriage was to provide men and women of strong passions with a sophistical excuse for unrestrained indulgence. That is a danger the novelists never grow tired of emphasizing. The majority of their philosophers are rakes. In order to join a Utopian settlement among the Hottentots, Mr. Glib abandons his wife and five children on the ground that, convinced

that marriage is the worst of monopolies (Godwin's own words), he wishes to restore to his wife the liberty of which she has been deprived. She takes the hint and departs with a recruiting officer.<sup>1</sup> When Mrs. Cloudley elopes with Captain Ivory, she enlightens her husband as to the parentage of a brood of children he thought his own. Lucretia is the offspring of a coachman; Amazonia is legitimate and so, probably, is Brutus; but Voltaire is the son of a hairdresser, Hercules of a plowman, Tom Paine of a rat-catcher, and the child that died, of Marauder.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Cloudley's mind becomes unhinged, and liberal quotations from Godwin make clear where rests the responsibility for the condition of affairs.<sup>3</sup>

The novelists do not spare other doctrines of *Political Justice*. They portray the Godwinians as committing petty theft, forgery, and highway robbery, and justifying their actions as attempts to equalize the distribution of property. They are not chary with the abuse and ridicule which Godwin's conception of perfectibility invites. Mr. Vapour anticipates an age of reason in which men will not feel the need of either food or clothing,<sup>4</sup> and Williams foresees such a complete conquest of matter by mind that in the future to yield to death will be a contemptible weakness.<sup>5</sup> Walker gives an account of a land governed by Godwinian principles; it is as grotesque as Gulliver's kingdom of Lagado.<sup>6</sup> Formerly it possessed a noble civilization, but since the adoption of Godwinism, effected after a terrible civil war, it has fallen into decay. As the possibility of reward has been excluded lest it destroy the condition of equality, all incentive to effort has been annihilated, the people have become indolent and vicious for want of something to do, and genius, having no hope of encouragement, does not exert its power to contrive new inventions for the benefit of the race. Parecho, a citizen of the republic, regrets the old order and is in favor of aristocratic government. Completely disillusioned, Dr. Alogos determines to return to

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, III, 56.

<sup>2</sup> *The Infernal Quixote*, III, 201.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. West's *The Infidel Father* (1802) and the anonymous *Memoirs of M. de Brinboc* (1805) also attack, in passing, Godwin's conception of marriage.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, II, 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Dorothea*, I, 48.

<sup>6</sup> *The Vagabond*, Vol. II, chap. vii.

England to warn his fellow-countrymen against the evils they will bring upon themselves if they yield to the seductions of the New Philosophy.

The poetic justice that governs these novels is significant of the contemporary judgment of Godwinians. Bitter experience cures many of their philosophical vagaries. Mr. Myope, robbed of his mistress by a disciple, sees the light and lends a willing ear to Christianity. Mr. Glib repents and returns to his wife and children. Bridgetina is reconciled to the duties of a considerate daughter and Dorothea to those of a submissive wife. Ruined heroines all confess their error and either become insane, commit suicide, or go into a decline. Interrupted in the writing of a book entitled *The Supremacy of Reason* by the news that his cousin whom he had ruined had killed herself, Mr. Sceptic loses his mind and makes an effective use of a pistol. For a similar reason Waldorf violently puts an end to his life. His philosophical instructor Lok dies of grief and regret. The Godwinian villains who refuse to repent are dealt with unsparingly. Marauder, driven to bay, goes mad and hurls himself from a cliff; Fitzosborne kills himself in prison during the Terror; Williams is stabbed by one of his victims; Stupeo is burned alive by most un-Rousseauistic Indians; and Denham and Vallaton die upon the scaffold. *In pace requiescant!*

Such are the "novels of buffoonery and scandal" which Godwin refused to discuss in his reply to Dr. Parr's "Spital Sermon." It is clear that, whether satiric or serious, these novels represent the reaction of common sense against speculation typical of the age—a distorted conception of human nature, an absurd theory of perfectibility, and a visionary scheme of social reconstruction. But in justice to Godwin we should bear in mind that his hope of a millennial world without law or government and inhabited by childless rationalists was no farther removed from actuality than Rousseau's state of nature; both were the product of impotent idealism. This was an age of extremes, and rationalism and sentimentalism were equally guilty in committing sins of extravagant optimism. But, although we cannot approve of the savage intolerance of many of Godwin's opponents, and although we cannot admit that the novelists, in preaching the gospel of things as they are, always succeeded in disposing of the

issues raised by Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, since individualistic critics of marriage in our own age are still troubled by problems fundamentally the same, yet there can be no question that in general time has confirmed Godwin's contemporaries in the matter of their adverse judgment of the fundamental principles of *Political Justice*. It was inevitable that, after the first flush of enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause had passed away, many of Godwin's disciples should desert him, and that he himself should suffer the punishment of a defender of a hated and expiring cause. Yet in 1813, at the very time when Crabb Robinson records that Godwin was living in retirement, having almost been driven from society, the philosopher had a new, young disciple, a poet who was destined to embody the sophistries of *Political Justice* in forms of imperishable, intense beauty. That young disciple was none other than Percy Bysshe Shelley.

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